

Addressing the vocabulary gap using the pattern grammar approach

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Addressing the Vocabulary Gap using the Pattern Grammar Approach

As teachers, we know the importance of vocabulary for accessing and meeting the demands of an increasingly challenging secondary curriculum. One way that schools are addressing the vocabulary gap is through explicit teaching of, and reference to, not only subject-specific (Tier 3) words but also general academic (Tier 2) words, as the glue that helps students to communicate fluently. This article examines how Pattern Grammar research, which explores the relationship between words and patterns of grammar, can support the teaching of academic vocabulary in a way that encourages coherence in expression across the curriculum. We describe the early-stage impact of collaboration between the Nishkam High School and the University of Birmingham, and detail two examples of classroom application.

A challenging context

Our school community, like many in the UK, comprises of students who speak a number of languages. In many cases, English is neither routinely spoken nor read in the home. For these students, their interaction with written and spoken English occurs during their brief time at school. Our school is in the top 20% of all schools for the proportion of students with English as an additional language. The school also stands in a deprived area, with over 30% of students qualifying for the pupil premium; it has been well documented that low socioeconomic status contributes to the vocabulary gap (see Hoff 2006). Our teachers see the challenges to this community of learners through students lacking the confidence to manipulate the English language to suit audience and purpose, and finding it difficult to decode meaning in texts from across the curriculum.

From ‘words’ to ‘how words behave’

Seeking to address the vocabulary gap problem, we introduced etymology and morphology to our Literacy lessons (following Quigley 2018) and included words from the Tier 2 academic word list (Coxhead 2000) in each subject’s planning documents. However, while our teachers are confident in teaching their subject-specific vocabulary, we recognised the need for more guidance on the teaching of general academic vocabulary. But how best to teach these words as *the glue that helps students to communicate fluently and coherently*?

Through collaboration with Dr Amanda Patten at the University of Birmingham, we began exploring the potential in utilising Pattern Grammar research to inform our pedagogic practice. Together, we identified the following goals. We wanted to:

- **Train** teachers to examine how words behave (the patterning of words)
- **Support** teachers to better articulate why certain words operate most effectively in a given context
- **Encourage** teachers to attend to aspects of language alongside curriculum content

What do we mean by language *patterns*?

While we often think of a word’s context in quite broad terms (e.g. whether a word is associated with a particular genre or subject area), a Pattern Grammar approach encourages us to attend also to the local context of a word within a sentence. For example, the verb *focus* commonly occurs before the preposition *on* followed by a noun group, as in (1). We can refer to this grammatical pattern using the shorthand label **V on n**.

(1) He is currently **focusing on assessment and development** (“focus” collinsdictionary.com)

A *pattern* then is a recurring local context for a word or group of words. For instance, in (2), the verb *concentrate* appears in this same pattern.

(2) It was up to him to **concentrate on his studies** and make something of himself (“concentrate” collinsdictionary.com)

As these examples show, “pattern and meaning are connected”; that is, words that occur in the same patterns often have similar meanings (Hunston and Francis 2000, 83).

On the Pattern Grammar approach to teaching vocabulary...

- Students are repeatedly **exposed** to a variety of examples of words in patterns
- Students are encouraged to “**notice** patterns wherever they are met” (Hunston 2002, 176)
- Words and their meanings are **explored** within the patterns that they occur (Holme 2010, 130; Hunston 2002, 176)

This approach reflects the interrelationship between words and grammar that exists in natural language. Vocabulary is taught using materials that encourage “grammatical consciousness-raising” (Hunston and Francis 2000, 262); that is, students learn vocabulary *through* attending to aspects of language structure, and learn more about how language is structured *through* vocabulary.

This means that teachers can address gaps in vocabulary *alongside* a focus on communicative coherence. Neither learners nor their teachers need to be especially adept at using grammatical terminology (teachers can choose whether to refer to pattern labels or not); what is needed is an openness to explore and attend to aspects of language structure.

The research background

This pedagogic approach stems from a long tradition of Pattern Grammar research conducted at the University of Birmingham, which began with a pioneering analysis of authentic language data. From this, came the observation that natural language is comprised of recurrent patterns that combine information about words and grammar, and the resulting insight that words are best described in terms of their use; that is, the grammatical patterns in which they occur (Hunston and Francis 2000).

Subsequent research has explored the relevance of Pattern Grammar for language learning contexts, including English language teaching and the teaching of English literacy (see Hunston 2002; 2007). There is now considerable evidence in support of such approaches from studies showing how language is acquired and stored in the mind (see e.g. Ellis, Römer and O'Donnell 2016) and from an emerging literature in *pedagogic construction grammar*. As argued in Patten and Perek (forthc.), teaching materials and resources based on Pattern Grammar are key to operationalising this body of (applied) linguistic research.

Bringing research into the classroom

Teachers from across the curriculum were interested to learn about the Pattern Grammar approach and undertook some preliminary training. Following this, a working group, comprised of representative practitioners (“champions”) from different subject areas, began to engage with the project. These volunteers designed materials and trialled them in the classroom. From this work, several distinct approaches evolved, two of which are explored here.

Application 1: Examining Tier 2 words that *behave* as Tier 3 words in Maths

Our Maths champion uses language patterning to help disambiguate subject-specific uses of words from their more general English usage. This simple starter exercise focuses on the word *significant*.

(3) Re-write each of these sentences and replace the word *significant* with a synonym:

- Do you think **it is significant** [that he didn't turn up on Saturday]?
- She explained the **significance of the poppy symbol** at remembrance

In this exercise, students experiment with substituting different words into a given pattern (see Holme 2010, 128). They explore the productivity of the patterns **it v-link ADJ that** (an adjective preceded by *it* and a linking verb, followed by a *that*-clause) and **N of n** (a noun followed by the preposition *of* and a noun group), by producing other academic vocabulary items that can occur within these local contexts, such as *important/importance* and *relevant/relevance*.

This sense of the word *significant* can then be contrasted with its subject-specific meaning in the unique patterning of (4), providing a nice opportunity to decode exam questions.

(4) Give/write/round X to Y significant figures

Application 2: Examining patterns in students' work in English

Champions in English and the Social Sciences use materials based on students' writing to highlight associations between words and patterns. One exercise from a Post-16 lesson features sentences extracted from essays that contain ambitious vocabulary and sophisticated concepts, but include words used in the wrong contexts. The task involves a close textual analysis of both the meaning and structure of these sentences. In discussion with the teacher, the students observe that while the use of the word *irreverent* in (5) is entirely appropriate, suggesting a lack of respect for a concept generally taken seriously, the relationship between the narrator's attitude and the concept of death is missing from the sentence.

(5) *I lived, I loved, I quaff'd*

The use of the tricolon phrase creates a lofty tone...suggesting the narrator is irreverent death

The teacher provides other sentences containing the word *irreverent*, such as (6), and encourages students to notice the different patterns associated with this word. These patterns are comparable with those of the more familiar synonym, *disrespectful*. The students conclude that inserting the word *towards* improves the sentence in (5).

(6) No novelist since Dumas has been more **irreverent of the conventions of well-made fiction**
(Victor Hugo) **ADJ of n**

At this advanced level, patterning draws students' attention to the relationship between word choice and grammatical structure, with the aim of improving clarity and precision in written expression (Hunston 2002, 173–174). As Beck, McKeown et al. (2018) note, instruction that requires students to "identify and explain appropriate uses" through "reflective and analytical activities" encourages deep knowledge of vocabulary.

Early-stage impact

While it is still too early to identify impact on attainment, it is clear that the Pattern Grammar approach increases student and teacher engagement with language, and that students find this linguistic consciousness-raising to be enjoyable and insightful. One 'A' Level student ventures, "Before, teachers didn't really explain what was wrong with my writing; now we spend time looking in detail at the words and the best use for them".

The approach has influenced teachers' practice beyond these focused lessons. Feedback on writing is more precise and actionable using the Pattern Grammar approach; students are shown *why* their wording is wrong rather than simply knowing it is wrong in some way. Teacher confidence in attending to aspects of language is also growing; the diversity in how Pattern Grammar is being implemented is testament to this, as is the willingness of teachers from *across* the curriculum (even in "hard to reach" subjects), to embrace and contribute to the approach.

Pattern Grammar has also had further impact on teaching across the Nishkam School Trust. Colleagues in primary phases, who have also received training in the approach, are moving away from decontextualised "wow walls" towards "enable tables" that situate words within sentences and phrases, demonstrating how they behave in a given local context.

Embedding Pattern Grammar into the curriculum

Our next goal is to embed Pattern Grammar more fully into the secondary curriculum, with subject champions leading the way. Dr Amanda Patten is assisting us in customising the Academic Word List (AWL) in ways informed by Pattern Grammar research. Typically, the AWL is segmented into ten groups, ordered by frequency; but the words within these groups have nothing else in common.

The pattern-informed AWL groups together words that have a shared meaning and that occur in many of the same patterns. It draws on a reference work (see Collins COBUILD Grammar Patterns Online 2018) that catalogues the recurring patterns of English, and provides a list of words that occur within each pattern, sorted into 'meaning groups'. For example, the AWL words in (7) approximate to the meaning 'similar'. One pattern in which all of these words can occur is **ADJ to n** (an adjective followed by the preposition *to* and a noun group).

(7) THE 'SIMILAR' GROUP: analogous, equivalent, identical, parallel, related, similar

ADJ to n

The accident was **similar to one that happened in 1973** ("similar" collinsdictionary.com)

The words in each group can be taught together, as a coherent teaching point, using the Pattern Grammar approach. We see this as helping us to action, manage and monitor the teaching of general academic vocabulary across the curriculum, with different subjects focusing on particular groups of words and their patterning.

Conclusion

Research on natural language shows that word and grammar information is intertwined, which in turn suggests that words are best described in terms of their use; that is, the patterns in which they regularly occur. We believe it is this that will help our students to better understand, and gain ownership of, the words they learn and use.

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